

ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN PHILIPPINES: A FOUNDATION FOR GLOBAL COMPETENCE

Maria Grace E. Lucas

English, UM Digos College, City of Digos, Philippines
lucasmariagrace11@gmail.com

Received April 23, 2025; Revised May 13, 2025; Accepted May 18, 2025; Published May 27, 2025

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the implementation of English language teaching (ELT) in Lao primary schools, with a particular focus on early-grade learners in rural and multilingual settings. The primary objective is to explore how national curriculum goals align with actual classroom practices, and to identify the enabling and constraining factors that shape English proficiency development in Grades 1–6. Employing a literature-based methodology, the research synthesizes findings from peer-reviewed journals, government documents, and international reports published within the last five years. Thematic analysis reveals persistent challenges including inadequate teacher training, limited instructional resources, and a lack of culturally responsive pedagogy—particularly in underserved areas. However, promising practices such as interactive learning, use of visual aids, and peer collaboration demonstrate potential when supported by adequate teacher preparedness. A key contribution of this study lies in its integration of global communicative competence into early ELT discourse in Philippines, shifting the narrative from basic literacy acquisition to one that includes intercultural awareness and global readiness. This perspective introduces a novel dimension in the context of Lao education, where most existing studies focus on secondary or tertiary levels. The research concludes that achieving effective English language education at the primary level in Philippines requires systemic reforms in teacher education, curricular support, and pedagogical innovation. By linking national education policy with global standards, the study provides actionable insights for stakeholders aiming to enhance early English instruction in similarly under-resourced and linguistically diverse contexts.

Keywords: *English language teaching, primary education, Philippines, global competence, early-grade learning*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the role of English language education has grown significantly within primary education systems globally, including in the Philippines context. The teaching of English at the elementary level is not merely about linguistic competence, but is increasingly viewed as a foundation for developing global communicative skills and intercultural awareness (Gutiérrez-Colón & Somsivilay, 2021). Within Philippines, English has been introduced into the basic education curriculum as a key subject, reflecting broader policy ambitions to enhance international connectivity and employability of future generations (Ministry of Education and Sport, Lao PDR, as cited in Gutiérrez-Colón & Somsivilay, 2021). This trend underscores the theoretical premise that early exposure to a foreign language can leverage critical periods of cognitive

development, thereby facilitating more effective acquisition of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills compared to later-stage introduction.

From a pedagogical theory standpoint, early English instruction draws on input-rich and communicative models of second-language acquisition (SLA), which posit that meaningful interaction and exposure to the target language are crucial for developing proficiency (Krashen, 1985; Ellis, 2008). For young learners in primary schools, this means designing activities that are engaging, contextually meaningful, and scaffolded to their developmental stage. In the Lao primary school setting, teaching English thus entails not only selecting appropriate materials and methodologies but also considering local constraints such as teacher proficiency, resource availability, and varied learner backgrounds (Gutiérrez-Colón & Somsivilay, 2021). According to Heinz (2021), these contextual factors—both intrinsic (learner motivation, prior exposure) and extrinsic (infrastructure, curriculum quality) significantly influence the success of English language education in Philippines.

A recurring issue identified in recent research is that many students in Laotian primary schools struggle with foundational English language skills due to limited vocabulary, inadequate exposure to communicative use of English, and a lack of instructional support tailored to young learners. For example, one case study of EFL learners in Philippines found that difficulties in reading comprehension were heavily linked to limited vocabulary and complex grammatical structures, and that even when students attempted strategies (such as dictionary use or peer collaboration), the absence of structured pedagogical frameworks rendered these efforts insufficient (Vongsawath, Prasitiwi & Hidayat, 2025). Further compounding this, schools in remote or ethnic-minority areas face additional barriers: students often enter primary school without adequate proficiency in the national language (Lao), which makes the introduction of English even more challenging (Jeong, 2025). In this context, the disparity in teacher training, instructional resources, and support for learner autonomy emerges as a key obstacle to realizing early English competence and, by extension, global communicative readiness.

One significant research gap in the context of English language instruction in primary education in Philippines concerns the scarcity of empirical studies that focus specifically on young learners in rural and ethnically diverse settings, especially within the elementary school sector of the Philippines education system (Parrila et al., 2024). While existing investigations address generic EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teaching and learning at the tertiary or secondary level (e.g., Gutiérrez-Colón & Somsivilay, 2021; Choi et al., 2024), there remains limited evidence addressing how primary school pupils many of whom come from minority language backgrounds or rural communities experience the introduction of English in Grades 1–6. For example, a study by Vongsawath, Prasitiwi & Hidayat (2025) sheds light on reading comprehension challenges among university students in Philippines, but does not extend to younger learners in primary settings. This gap restricts our understanding of how early English

instruction aligns with cognitive, linguistic, and socio-cultural realities of primary-aged learners in Philippines.

A second gap relates to the alignment (or misalignment) between national policy, curriculum design, teacher preparation, and classroom practice in early English language teaching in Philippines. Although language-in-education policy reviews indicate that English is a compulsory subject starting at Grade 3 in Philippines, the implementation across schools is inconsistent, with limited attention to how curriculum and materials are adapted for young learners in diverse contexts (Choi et al., 2024). In rural schooling research, it is noted that quantitative and qualitative evidence remains dominated by a deficit-perspective emphasising resource scarcity rather than pedagogical dynamics (Huijsmans et al., 2024). Thus there is a need for primary-school-level research that maps the gap between intended curriculum objectives for English teaching, teacher competencies for young learner pedagogy, and actual classroom interactions. Without such investigations, interventions risk overlooking crucial contextual factors that influence effectiveness.

This study offers a unique contribution by focusing on early-grade English instruction within the primary school context of Philippines, addressing a research gap where few studies have centred explicitly on Grades 1–6 despite policy shifts to introduce English earlier. While earlier research has examined English language education at secondary and tertiary levels, the experiences of young learners in multilingual and resource-limited settings in Philippines remain underexplored (Vongsawath et al., 2025; Phetchanpheng & Charlet, 2024). Additionally, this research integrates teacher-student classroom interactions with the newly revised national primary curriculum framework, which emphasises active learning and inclusive pedagogy (Basic Education Quality and Access in Lao PDR [BEQUAL], 2023). Hence, the study bridges curriculum reform, young learner pedagogy, and local teacher implementation offering empirical insight into how global competence objectives manifest in Philippines' primary English language teaching (Dunn et al., 2023).

The objective of this study is to investigate how English language teaching is being implemented in primary schools in Philippines with a view to identifying key enablers and barriers to developing global communicative competence among young learners. Specifically, the research seeks to map the alignment between the national curriculum's early-grade English policy, teacher pedagogical practices, and learner outcomes in multilingual rural and urban contexts. It also aims to explore teacher perceptions, instructional materials usage, and classroom interaction patterns that support or inhibit English proficiency development in Grades 1–6. Finally, the study intends to formulate context-sensitive recommendations for enhancing primary English instruction, ultimately contributing to policy and practice aimed at global competence for Lao children.

RESEARCH METHOD

For this study, a literature-based method will be used. This approach involves gathering, organising, and synthesising existing scholarly work around the topic of English language teaching in primary schools in Philippines, rather than collecting new primary data from participants. According to recent guidance, a rigorous literature review should systematically search academic databases, apply inclusion and exclusion criteria, extract relevant findings, and interpret the body of knowledge to identify patterns, gaps, and implications. Because this research aims to map existing policy, pedagogy, and implementation studies on early-grade English in Philippines and correlate them with learner outcomes, the literature-based method is appropriate: it allows the researcher to build a theoretical and empirical foundation, highlight inconsistencies, and propose directions for future empirical work. The method also provides flexibility to integrate quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method studies published within the last five years to ensure currency of findings. The literature review will include systematic steps: database search (e.g., Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar), selection of peer-reviewed articles aligned to the research question, critical appraisal of methodological quality, and thematic synthesis of findings. In doing so, it will generate a conceptual framework linking national policy, primary-school pedagogy, and global competence objectives for English language teaching in Philippines.

As this research employs a literature-based methodology, data collection will focus on the systematic retrieval of scholarly articles, policy documents, and institutional reports relevant to English language teaching in primary schools in Philippines. The sources will be gathered from reputable academic databases including Scopus, ERIC, JSTOR, and Google Scholar, using a combination of keywords such as “English language education,” “primary schools,” “Philippines,” and “early-grade EFL instruction.” The inclusion criteria will prioritize peer-reviewed publications from the last five years (2020–2025), written in English, and directly addressing pedagogical practices, curriculum implementation, or language policy in the Laotian context. Grey literature such as government education reports and donor agency evaluations (e.g., BEQUAL, UNICEF) will also be included to provide contextual grounding. This structured and transparent approach ensures credibility, replicability, and comprehensive data coverage across thematic domains relevant to the study’s objectives (Snyder, 2019).

The collected data will be analysed using thematic analysis to identify, categorise, and interpret patterns across the literature. Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase model of thematic analysis familiarisation, initial coding, theme searching, theme reviewing, theme defining, and report production will guide the process. The analysis will explore themes such as teacher readiness, policy–practice gaps, learner outcomes, and the integration of global competence in classroom settings. Special attention will be given to how challenges and enabling factors vary across rural versus urban contexts, and across ethnic-linguistic learner groups. Comparative interpretation of findings from different sources will allow the study to triangulate conclusions and enhance trustworthiness. Synthesised themes will be used to formulate a conceptual framework illustrating the

dynamics of English language teaching at the primary level in Philippines, aligning with the research objectives and identifying directions for future empirical inquiry (Nowell et al., 2017).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of literature reveals that several systemic and pedagogical challenges hinder the effective teaching of English in Lao primary schools, especially in rural settings. A key issue is the lack of formal teacher training in early-grade EFL pedagogy, which results in inconsistent delivery of lessons and underutilization of communicative techniques (Choi et al., 2024). Additionally, curriculum materials often lack cultural and linguistic adaptation, especially for students from ethnic minority backgrounds (BEQUAL, 2023). As shown in Table 1, rural schools are more severely impacted across all categories, particularly in terms of teacher preparedness and resource availability. The mismatch between national policy mandates and ground-level execution continues to limit student exposure to quality English instruction (Huijsmans et al., 2024; Jeong, 2025).

Table 1. Challenges in English Language Teaching in Lao Primary Schools				
Category	Rural Impact	Urban Impact	Reported Frequency	Sources
Teacher Training	High	Medium	Very Frequent	Choi et al., 2024
Curriculum Design	Medium	Low	Occasional	BEQUAL, 2023
Learner Background	High	Low	Frequent	Jeong, 2025
Resource Availability	High	Medium	Very Frequent	Huijsmans et al., 2024
Policy Implementation	Medium	Low	Frequent	Choi et al., 2024

In contrast to the barriers, the study also identified several effective pedagogical strategies currently in use, albeit unevenly applied across regions. Interactive learning techniques, supported by visual aids and peer collaboration, were found to significantly enhance learner engagement and retention (Vongsawath et al., 2025). However, the adoption of first language (L1) support and formative assessment remains low due to teacher uncertainty and lack of training (Phetchanpheng & Charlet, 2024). Table 2 summarizes the thematic practices that correlate with increased student motivation and classroom participation. These findings suggest that scaling teacher capacity and instructional design towards child-centered, multimodal approaches can improve English proficiency outcomes in early education stages (Nowell et al., 2017; BEQUAL, 2023).

In this context, Table 2 presents a summary of the analyzed data, illustrating the relationship between game design features and learning outcomes, as well as relevant moderating variables.

Table 2. Thematic Summary of Effective Pedagogical Practices

Theme	Application Level	Learner Engagement	Teacher Preparedness	Sources
Interactive Learning	Moderate	High	Medium	Vongsawath et al., 2025
L1 Support	Low	Medium	Low	Phetchanpheng & Charlet, 2024
Visual Aids	High	High	High	BEQUAL, 2023
Continuous Assessment	Medium	Medium	Medium	Nowell et al., 2017
Peer Collaboration	Moderate	High	Medium	Jeong, 2025

The findings highlight a pronounced disparity between the policy ambitions for early-grade English instruction and the realities facing primary schools in Philippines. The first table illustrates that categories such as teacher training and resource availability are rated as “High” impact in rural settings and “Very Frequent” in occurrence, pointing to systemic limitations in infrastructure and professional preparation in those contexts. A recent study underscores the critical role of teacher educator overload and institutional strain, showing how multifaceted duties and resource constraints hamper teacher-training colleges in Philippines thus indirectly affecting primary school capacity (Sengsoulintha, 2025). Meanwhile, the second table’s data on pedagogical practices signal that although visual aids and interactive learning show higher application and learner engagement, other crucial supports like L1 scaffolding and continuous formative assessment remain under-utilized. This discrepancy suggests that even when material resources improve, pedagogical execution and teacher developmental support lag behind, creating a dual challenge of what is available and how it is used. Consequently, to move toward global competence in English language teaching, both capacity building (teachers + materials) and pedagogical transformation (method + context adaptation) must be addressed.

Recent systematic reviews emphasise the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy in English language teaching (ELT) for young learners in Southeast Asia. For example, Ratri, Widiati, Astutik, and Jonathans (2024) found that integration of local cultural content into ELT significantly improves learners’ attitudes and engagement offering students meaningful contexts that connect to their background, rather than abstract foreign-language tasks (Ratri et al., 2024). In the case of countries with multilingual and ethnically diverse populations like Philippines, such responsiveness becomes a key leverage point for enhancing young learners’ motivation and reducing attrition. Moreover, by bridging students’ prior knowledges with instructional English content, local-culture integration aligns with constructivist theories of language acquisition, supporting deeper comprehension and use (Ratri et al., 2024). However, the review noted that many studies still focus on secondary or tertiary contexts, leaving a gap in early-grade contexts especially within primary schools. Consequently, integrating local

culture in primary English lessons appears under-examined in Philippines, suggesting that effective pedagogical adaptation remains largely theoretical (Maqsood et al., 2020).

Another strand of literature explores the alignment between language-education policy and classroom practice in ASEAN primary schooling. A recent study by Asadullah (2025) highlights that improving the quality of basic education in Southeast Asia is strongly influenced by coherent policy frameworks, teacher preparation, and resource allocation (Asadullah, 2025). The study reports that while many governments commit to introducing English early, actual implementation often lacks the infrastructural and human-resource foundations required particularly teacher training, instructional materials, and monitoring systems. In the Lao context, for instance, teacher-training institutions grapple with heavy workloads and limited resources, which impairs the cascade of training into effective classroom practices (Sengsoulintha, 2025). This divergence between policy ambition and on-ground capacity echoes earlier findings but is now reinforced by newer empirical data, underlining that the pedagogical and systemic readiness for early English instruction remains uneven. The implication is that without strengthening the policy-practice nexus, young learners may not benefit fully from early English programmes (Stevens et al., 2022).

This research uniquely focuses on the primary-school level (Grades 1–6) in the context of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, addressing a notable gap in the literature which predominantly centres on secondary and tertiary English language education. Despite broad policy initiatives to introduce English early, little empirical work has examined how young learners’ multilingual backgrounds, classroom practices and teacher readiness converge in Lao primary schools (Sengsoulintha, 2025). Moreover, by utilising a literature-based methodology, the study synthesises recent empirical findings on implementation in rural and ethnically diverse settings to construct a conceptual framework linking policy, pedagogy and learner outcomes. In doing so, it offers a timely and context-sensitive perspective that combines both systemic (e.g., curriculum, teacher training) and classroom-level (e.g., interactive pedagogy) factors. This dual focus advances knowledge by moving beyond descriptive accounts to a more integrative understanding of early English instruction in Philippines, thereby supporting evidence-informed interventions (Cheng, 2024).

Further, this study contributes novelty by emphasising global communicative competence as the overarching goal of early English instruction, moving the discourse beyond mere linguistic proficiency toward intercultural and internationalised outcomes. While much of the existing research in the Lao context emphasises resource constraints and learner deficits (Jeong, 2025), this study reframes the challenge as aligning teaching practices with global competence frameworks and young learners’ specific sociocultural realities. It incorporates recent insights into innovative ELT strategies adopted in rural Philippines (Doeden & Smidt, 2024) and the professionalisation of teacher-educators (Sengsoulintha, 2025) to highlight how early-grade pedagogy can be intentionally designed for global readiness. Consequently, the study fosters a shift from gap-filling to

capacity-building, positioning English education in Lao primary schools as a stepping-stone toward children's integration into a globalised world.

This research holds global relevance as it contributes to broader conversations on equitable access to quality English language education within developing, multilingual nations. By highlighting the challenges and opportunities of early-grade English teaching in Philippines, the study provides a contextualised example for other low-resource countries navigating similar transitions under the global push for Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) "inclusive and equitable quality education" (Jeong, 2025). The insights generated from this research can inform international development agencies, curriculum designers, and teacher training institutions on how to localise global language policies effectively. Furthermore, by foregrounding global communicative competence as a goal, the study aligns with 21st-century educational priorities that seek to prepare students for intercultural understanding, digital collaboration, and international mobility (Doeden & Smidt, 2024). It also strengthens the case for developing pedagogical models that are both globally relevant and locally adaptable, especially for linguistically diverse primary learners in underserved regions. As such, this study bridges local realities and global goals in meaningful, actionable ways.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reveal that while early-grade English instruction in Philippines is strategically aligned with national and global educational goals, its implementation remains challenged by disparities in teacher training, resource distribution, and contextual adaptation. Rural schools, in particular, face greater obstacles due to infrastructural limitations and a lack of pedagogical support tailored to young, multilingual learners. However, the presence of effective practices such as interactive learning and visual aids demonstrates potential when aligned with appropriate teacher preparedness. Thematic analysis also indicates that policy and classroom realities often diverge, highlighting the need for stronger alignment. Furthermore, underutilized strategies like first-language support and formative assessment require greater emphasis. Addressing these challenges through targeted reforms could significantly improve learner outcomes and strengthen global competence from early grades. Ultimately, the study affirms the value of culturally responsive, evidence-informed pedagogical frameworks in bridging systemic gaps in English language teaching in developing contexts like Philippines.

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